

COLONIAL REPORTS.—MISCELLANEOUS.

No. 6.

HONG KONG.

BUBONIC PLAGUE.

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COLONIAL REPORTS.

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ANNUAL.

No.	Colony.	Year.
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134	Jamaica - - - - -	"
135	Newfoundland - - - - -	1893
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159	British Guiana - - - - -	"
160	Sierra Leone - - - - -	"
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No.	Colony.	Subject.
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BUBONIC PLAGUE IN HONG KONG.

BUBONIC
PLAGUE.

SIR WILLIAM ROBINSON to MR. CHAMBERLAIN.

Government House, Hong Kong,
May 6, 1896.

SIR,

I HAVE the honour to forward, for your information, the following account of the incipience and progress of the bubonic plague in this Colony during the current year, and of the measures which have been and are being taken to suppress it.

2. The first case of plague occurred on the 4th January, and from that date to the 29th January there were 45 cases, as reported to you in my Despatch of that date.* Those cases were merely sporadic, being confined principally to the western portion of the city. Precautionary measures of the following nature to prevent the disease from spreading were adopted without delay:—

- (1.) Every person found to be suffering from the disease was at once removed to the Hospital at Kennedy Town, situated in an isolated position at the extreme western suburb of Victoria, and was there placed under treatment.
- (2.) The other inmates of the house in which the case had occurred and who were in close contact with the patient, were segregated on large and roomy junks, locally known as "Marriage Boats," hired by Government for the purpose and anchored in the vicinity of Stonecutter's Island, where they were detained under observation for 10 days, nine days having been ascertained to be the maximum period of incubation of the disease in 1894. Every attention was paid to the comfort of those segregated, who, besides being fed at the expense of Government, were supplied with clothing whilst their own was being disinfected by the sanitary board before being finally returned to them. After the period of 10 days had elapsed they were at liberty, if still free from the disease, to return to the city or to their own houses on the mainland. Only one or two persons developed the disease during the period of isolation, and they were, of course, at once removed to the Kennedy Town Hospital for treatment.
- (3.) The house in which the case occurred was at once closed and guarded by the police until it had been thoroughly cleansed, disinfected, and whitewashed, under the supervision of the medical officer of health attached to the Sanitary Board.

* Not printed.

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3. During the greater part of January, Canton was reported to be almost entirely free from the disease, but towards the end of that month it became more prevalent there. This fact materially altered the state of affairs, and as, in view of the difficulty of restricting the passenger traffic from that port, from which Hong Kong derives the greater part of its food supply, the Colony was in any case exposed to the danger of introduction of cases from thence, and as the number of persons in segregation amounted to over 200 and was rapidly increasing, the Sanitary Board resolved to abandon the system of isolation on marriage boats. It was accordingly decided that such of the inmates of infected houses as desired to do so should be permitted, after their clothing had been disinfected, to proceed to Canton, their departure being supervised by the police, and a sufficient sum of money being given to each person to defray the cost of his passage and his necessary expenses during the voyage.

4. Towards the middle of February the number of cases occurring daily began to show an appreciable increase, and the disease ceased to prevail only in a single district, but appeared to be spreading over the whole city. Consequently on the 19th of that month it was declared by the Sanitary Board to be epidemic, and from that date the health officer for the port ceased issuing clean bills of health to vessels leaving Hong Kong.

5. About the same time the ordinary staff of the Sanitary Board was increased by the appointment, as temporary inspectors of nuisances, of nine European police constables, who were entrusted with the duty of aiding in the supervision of the inspecting, cleansing, and disinfecting of houses.

6. It is a somewhat remarkable fact that during the latter part of February and the first three weeks in March, while the disease was increasing in Hong Kong, Canton was reported to have become almost entirely free from it, the immunity it enjoyed being attributed by the Chinese to the cold weather which prevailed during that period.

7. It was, of course, not to be expected that the Chinese would submit with any great complacency to the compulsory inspection, disinfection, and cleansing of their dwellings, which cannot be carried out without causing some discomfort to those concerned; and, though I am happy to say that they have shown themselves this year more ready than in 1894 to recognise the absolute necessity in the interests of the public health of the sanitary measures which have to be adopted, they nevertheless have displayed great unwillingness to come forward to report cases of plague coming under their cognisance. Innumerable have been the devices and subterfuges to which they have had recourse in order to remove patients and corpses from the Colony without the knowledge of the authorities, and in many instances, with a view to avoiding enforced segregation, they deserted their houses, leaving victims of the disease dead or dying, the bodies not having been discovered till some days after death. One case was

brought to light in which a corpse was being conveyed secretly out of the colony as merchandise in a camphor-wood box.

8. In order, therefore, to allay the suspicions and apprehensions of the Chinese, who, as a people, are naturally timid, and to induce them to report cases with greater readiness, it was decided, towards the end of March, to permit them to remove their sick to Canton under certain conditions, a copy of which is enclosed,* and this privilege was shortly afterwards extended to the removal of corpses. Although this concession has been availed of only to the extent of the removal to Canton of one patient and four bodies, I am of opinion that the granting of it has tended to calm the minds of the native population, and to discourage the concealment of cases from the knowledge of the authorities.

9. I am glad also in this connection to be able to state that, although a good many of the well-to-do Chinese have removed their wives and families from the Colony, and although the attendance at most of the schools has greatly diminished, there has been no general exodus of the population such as occurred in 1894, and business has so far not suffered to any appreciable extent, except perhaps from the imposition of quarantine by the Governments of Singapore and Batavia.

10. Early in April, the Sanitary Board recommended that, in view of the danger involved in sending inmates from plague-infected houses to Canton, where the disease had by that time again assumed formidable dimensions, sheds should be erected in the Colony for their segregation while their clothing was being disinfected. Three such sheds have accordingly been erected, one each in the east, west, and central portions of the city, and are being used for the temporary housing of the inmates of infected houses whilst the latter are being cleansed and disinfected.

11. On the 6th April I found it necessary to apply to His Excellency the General Officer Commanding for military assistance to aid in the work of house-to-house visitation and cleansing, and he was good enough to detail for that work 12 men from the Royal Engineers, and subsequently 17 men from the Rifle Brigade and three non-commissioned officers, who are cheerfully performing their difficult work in a most efficient manner. They are being remunerated at the same rate as that fixed in 1894.

12. The search party visits and inspects each Chinese house in the Colony about once in every 10 days, and from the 25th February to the 21st April no fewer than 3,200 houses, comprising 8,330 floors, each floor forming, with few exceptions, a separate dwelling, were thoroughly cleansed, disinfected, and in many cases also limewashed, by the "whitewash brigade." This work is still in progress. The total number of occupied Chinese houses in the city is 6,350; but, as a number of these are occupied by well-to-do Chinese, no interference on the part of the sanitary board is necessary. It is hoped that, before long, every house in

* Enclosure 1,

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the city requiring attention will have been cleansed and lime-washed.

13. Having described in detail the sanitary measures which have been taken to cope with the disease, I now proceed to deal with the subject from a medical point of view.

14. I am informed by Dr. Lowson that the type of the disease is identically the same as in 1894, a full description of which is given in that officer's report, forwarded in my Despatch of 16th April 1895.*

15. I enclose a return† showing the number of cases and deaths to date, and the number of cases which have occurred during each week since the 4th January.

16. I may here mention that, in order to ensure all possible accuracy in the statistics, the bodies of all Chinese whose deaths are registered but the causes of whose deaths have not been certified by a medical practitioner] are examined before burial by the Medical Officer of Health. In proof of the necessity of this step, I may state that that officer found that between the 8th February and the 30th April as many as 50 deaths from plague had been erroneously registered as due to other causes, principally consumption, bronchitis, and intermittent fever.

17. The mortality generally, as compared with 1894, shows a slight improvement. The total number of Chinese cases up to noon on the 4th instant was 675, and the number of deaths 602, or a little more than 89 per cent., whereas in 1894 the mortality among the Chinese who were treated in hospitals was 93 per cent.; and it must also be borne in mind that in the latter calculation no account is taken of dead bodies found in the streets and sent at once to the burial ground, while the returns for the current year include *all* deaths from the plague. There are, however, grounds for believing that children are more liable to infection than was the case in that year. Twenty-two persons, other than Chinese, have contracted the disease during the current year. Their nationalities were as follows:—Europeans, 6; Indians, 15 (including Mrs. Joseph and her family, reported in my Despatch of 8th April 1896‡); Siamese, 1. Amongst the Europeans, two Sisters of Charity from the Italian Convent have died, having contracted the disease from a case which occurred in that convent. The third case was a master mariner named James Ernest Cloud, living at a marine boarding-house, who, it is believed, contracted the disease on board a Chinese launch running between Hong Kong and Kowloon. He also, I regret to say, succumbed to the attack. The other cases were those of two children of Warder Gidley, of the Victoria Gaol, one of whom died, and the other recovered; and of an Austrian in the employ of Messrs. Sander and Company, who is still under treatment at the Government Civil Hospital, and is progressing favourably towards convalescence. The Siamese died, and of the 15 Indians six died, four recovered, and five are still under treatment.

* Not printed.

† Enclosure 2.

‡ Not printed.

18. Early in March, it was deemed advisable, in view of the possibility of the disease assuming an epidemic form, to procure extra medical assistance, and, by the courtesy of Admiral Hoffman, I was fortunate enough to be able to secure the services of Dr. Wilm, of the Imperial German Navy, whose eminent attainments as a bacteriologist and intimate acquaintance with this particular disease, which he had previously studied here as well as under Professor Koch, in Berlin, render him a most valuable acquisition to the Government medical staff. He arrived here from Japan on the 14th March, since which time he has been actively engaged in treating patients at the Kennedy Town Hospital.

19. With regard to the origin of the plague, there seems no doubt that it may be classed as a filth disease. It is confined chiefly to the poorer classes of Chinese, whose dirty and insanitary habits foster its progress. The ordinary Chinaman of the poorer class in this Colony seldom thinks of cleaning his house, and the heaps of dirt and rubbish which the house-cleansing parties remove from one small floor of a house cause the spectator to wonder where the occupant can find room for himself. Many of the houses are, moreover, so situated and constructed as to afford an utterly inadequate supply of light and ventilation, and the position is aggravated by the high rents which prevail in this colony and which encourage overcrowding. The housing of the working classes in Hong Kong is an important question, the consideration of which should be no longer delayed. I accordingly propose shortly to appoint a Commission to inquire into and report on this matter.

20. It is also a noteworthy fact that the outbreak of the present year, as in 1894, was preceded by a prolonged scarcity of water. In 1894 the rainfall commenced exceptionally late, and not until the supply of water in the reservoirs was nearly exhausted, while in 1895 the amount of rain which fell was so abnormally small (45·84 inches instead of the usual 90 inches) that it was necessary, in order to husband the supply until the rains of 1896, to place the Colony on a limited supply throughout the dry season of 1895–1896. On the other hand, it must not be forgotten that the rainfall of 1894, when it did at last come, was accompanied by a sudden and very great increase in the number of cases of plague, doubtless because the wet weather drove the Chinese within doors, and increased the overcrowding in these houses. The rains this year began early, and there is now no scarcity of water in the Colony.

21. With regard to the financial aspect of the situation, I will address a further communication to you at a later date. In the meantime I will content myself with remarking that, although the measures which I have described necessarily involve a considerable outlay, all possible economy is being exercised, bearing in mind the urgent necessity of complete and comprehensive action in suppressing at all hazards this fell disease, the annual recurrence of which cannot fail to affect prejudicially the pros-

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perity of this Colony. That those measures are bearing good fruit may, I think, be fairly deduced from the figures of the return of cases, which cannot be considered alarmingly high when it is borne in mind that the disease is raging in the neighbourhood of the Colony and on the mainland in the city of Canton with great virulence, and that the population of the Colony has not been diminished by any such extensive exodus of the Chinese as took place in 1894.

22. In conclusion, I desire to state that the members of the Sanitary Board and its staff deserve great credit for the efficient manner in which they are supervising and discharging duties of an arduous and disagreeable nature. Extra and anxious work has also fallen on other departments, but I do not propose on the present occasion to mention the names of individuals deserving of special commendation. I consider the staff at present employed in plague work, aided as it is by departments of Government, is sufficient to cope with the existing conditions, but so long as the disease is epidemic in Canton this Colony can never be free from grave anxiety. If the plague continues to rage in that city, it may be necessary to endeavour to prohibit Chinese immigration into this Colony from thence, though I doubt whether it will be possible to devise steps for that purpose which will prove really effective. In any case, nothing will be left undone which can in any way help to eradicate a disease which has already inflicted great loss and suffering on this Colony, and which may permanently affect its welfare, unless it can be prevented from recurring,

I have, &c.

WILLIAM ROBINSON,

Enclosure 1.

CONDITIONS SUBJECT TO WHICH PERSONS SUFFERING FROM
BUBONIC PLAGUE WILL BE PERMITTED TO LEAVE THE
COLONY.

1. Suitable ambulance boats shall be provided, and they shall be towed astern of the SS. "Pasig," SS. "Tai On," or other river steamboat, to Whampoa and Canton, and shall on no account land any person or thing before arriving at Whampoa or Canton.

2. While in the waters of the Colony the ambulance boats shall fly the yellow quarantine flag.

3. While in the waters of the Colony the ambulance boats must lie within the quarantine ground, but they shall, if required, come to the China Merchants Wharf, Saiyingpoon, at 4 p.m. of the day on which they are to be towed to Whampoa and Canton, or at such other time as the Medical Officer of Health may fix.

4. One ambulance boat, if required, shall leave the wharf every day at such hour as will permit of her being taken in tow, at a point west of the fairway buoy, by the afternoon steamboat leaving for Whampoa and Canton.

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5. Any person desirous of going to Whampoa or Canton by the ambulance boat must notify the police before 2 p.m. o'clock (or such other hour as the Medical Officer of Health may fix) on the day he desires to leave.

On the receipt of such notification a medical man will visit the premises, and if, in his opinion, the person is suffering from bubonic plague, the medical man will give a certificate to that effect in the attached form.*

6. All persons residing upon the premises in which a case of bubonic plague occurs will be allowed, as soon as their clothing has been disinfected, to proceed on board a Canton steamboat under the supervision of officers approved by the Sanitary Board.

7. In all cases where persons suffering from bubonic plague have elected to proceed to Whampoa or Canton, after their departure the premises in which they resided shall be fumigated, cleansed, limewashed, and dealt with as the Sanitary Board may direct.

8. In all cases where persons suffering from bubonic plague have elected to proceed to Whampoa or Canton, the clothing and bedding which have been used by them shall be taken possession of by some officer authorised by the Board and destroyed, and such persons must be provided with a new suit of clothing and then removed in an ambulance to the ambulance boat and put on board.

9. No persons, except attendants and those in charge of the ambulance boat, will be allowed on board the ambulance boat without a certificate from a registered medical practitioner approved by the Board, which certificate must be in the form appended hereto,* and presented at the time of embarkation when asked for.

10. The ambulance boats on returning to the waters of the Colony shall proceed direct to the quarantine ground, there to be dealt with as the Sanitary Authority may direct.

11. All food required for the use of the persons on board the ambulance boats shall be put on board when they are at the wharf receiving sick persons. None of the attendants or others on board will be allowed to leave the ambulance boats while they are in the waters of the Colony without the written permission of the Medical Officer of Health.

HUGH MCCALLUM,
Secretary.

Sanitary Board Room,
Hongkong, 21st March, 1896.

* Not printed.

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Enclosure 2.

A RETURN showing (A.) the Number of Cases of Bubonic Plague which have been reported as occurring in the Colony from the 1st day of January 1896 to the date hereof, and (B.) the number of Deaths therefrom during the same Period.

Number of cases reported up till noon of the 5th May 1896.	715
Number of cases reported during the past 24 hours -	14*
Total number of cases reported to date -	729
Number of deaths reported up till noon of the 5th May 1896.	629
Number of deaths reported during the past 24 hours -	10
Total number of deaths recorded to date -	639

* Eight of these occurred in the city, three in British Kowloon, and three in the harbour.

(Signed) HUGH MCCALLUM,
Sanitary Board Room, Secretary.
6th May 1896.

WEEKLY ABSTRACT.

Week ended—	Cases.	Deaths.	Week ended—	Cases.	Deaths.
4th January 1896 -	Nil.	Nil.	7th March 1896 -	35	33
11th " " -	18	14	14th " " -	27	27
18th " " -	7	7	21st " " -	42	31
25th " " -	8	9	28th " " -	45	45
1st February " -	18	16	4th April " -	63	45
8th " " -	12	8	11th " " -	63	60
15th " " -	25	19	18th " " -	73	60
22nd " " -	45	41	25th " " -	78	77
29th " " -	37	30	2nd May " -	80	63